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ABSTRACT

Education is the most basic of basic needs. In the Philippines, the performance of the education sector does not fully match its potential. However, education can serve as the catalyst for resolving basic issues and creating economic development. Since high technology is the new resource of the 1990s, a new education strategy is needed. This strategy should use an open learning system and feature distance education, "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner." In practice, distance education usually involves radio, television, or film, correspondence studies, and tutorial sessions. The most advanced systems of distance education are open universities. It is important in distance education to maintain quality, to allow for flexibility, and to complement formal schooling. Distance education is feasible in the Philippines now since there are available resources, skilled personnel, and several models to choose from. A market exists in the Philippines for distance education. The proposed system of distance education should be called the National Open University, and it should make use of the educational mass media that are available. Distance education can make a difference in the education of women, in alleviating poverty, and in educating for environmental conservation. Education begins in the home and distance education can enhance this learning environment. (KC)

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RESOURCE PAPER

FEASIBILITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

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FEASIBILITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Allow me first to define the premises of my paper. In this way, I hope that we can better appreciate the issues and the alternative strategies we may consider in the second step, of the paper which is to determine the feasibility of distance education in the Philippines.

Education is the Most Basic of Basic Needs

In a world of global problems, and an environment in the Philippines of great challenges and of great promise, how do we begin this discourse?

We begin with my basic premise.

And that has to do with the sustenance, development, and advancement of the most basic of basic needs - that of education. It is education that facilitates the attainment of all other needs - of health, food, clothing, shelter, mobility, energy, technology, culture, and all the other basic goods and services that comprise the minimum decent living. Indeed, there is no area as critical as that of the education sector in the Philippines today.

Performance Does Not Fully Match the Potential

The performance of Philippine education sector, while remarkable given its environment, still does not yield the full potential it is capable of.

In the Philippines, about 9 million students are currently enrolled in 32,000 elementary schools, over 3 million in 5,400 secondary schools, and over 1.5 million in 1,200 tertiary education institutions. The teaching force includes 248,000 elementary, 99,000 secondary and 57,000 tertiary level teachers. Enrollment ratios exceed international averages at all levels and underscore an exceptionally strong social demand for education. In 1980, for example, gross enrollment ratios for the Philippines were over 100% in elementary, 65% in secondary, and 26% in tertiary education, while the averages for developing countries were 75%, 23% and 7%, respectively. This achievement is particularly striking when levels of economic development are considered. Countries with a per capita GNP similar to that of the Philippines have enrollment ratios about half as high in both secondary and tertiary education. The coverage of the Philippine system is wider than even that of countries in East Asia and Latin America - countries with relatively well-developed educational systems and which on average have higher levels of per capital GNP.

Another noteworthy achievement of the Philippine system is the exceptionally high representation of female students in all three levels of education. Enrollments at the elementary level are about equal for both boys and girls, but female enrollment exceeds that of males in secondary and tertiary education. In fact, rates of failure, dropout and repetition in the elementary

grades are significantly higher for boys than for girls, and the same trend is apparent at the secondary level.[1/]

Education is the Catalyst for Resolving Basic Issues

But there are some basic societal issues that remain unresolved. The crucial role of education as the catalyst for resolving these problems in this regard cannot be overemphasized.

For example, the Philippines ranks at the low level of number 84 among the 160 countries surveyed by the United Nations Development Program in terms of human development index (HDI). The HDI index in its simplest form combines national income of a country with two social indicators - adult literacy and life expectancy - to give a composite picture of human progress in a given society.[2/] Contributing to this low HDI index in the Philippines is the reality of the poverty of the masses, especially those in the countryside. In 1985, more than 30 million people out of a population of 56 million were living in poverty. This was in the sense that their income did not enable them to satisfy basic needs.

Using comparable definitions, in 1971 the incomes of about 3 million families were insufficient to meet basic needs; in 1985, the figure had risen to 5 million families. The outlook for the future is equally disturbing. Every year over 700,000 new entrants join a labor force that already contains about 6 million underemployed or unemployed workers. About 16 million new entrants will join the labor force in the next 15 years and it is not clear where these additional job seekers will be absorbed. There is already extensive poverty; and it is exacerbated by the maldistribution of assets, rapid growth of the labor force, and high levels of underemployment. The Philippines will have to make major efforts just to keep the poverty problem from worsening. No doubt rapid economic growth can help alleviate the poverty, but the issues like type of growth, quality of economic management and technical manpower are of fundamental importance.

The prevalence of a curriculum and education programs, which advocate an urban-based, industrialized and elitist system of education in this tropical archipelago, which is largely rural in lifestyle and origins, is another major issue to be addressed.[3/]

Finally, it is the rapid decline of resources for education which needs to be corrected. As a percentage of GNP, Philippine spending for education in 1985 was only 1.3 per cent, compared with Thailand's 3.6 per cent, Indonesia's 3.7 per cent, and Malaysia's 6 per cent. For developing countries, it was 7.7 per cent in 1987. There has been a continuing decline in educational expenditures over the years. In 1961-62, about 32% of the national budget went to education. This went down to 26% in 1968-70, and by 1981 it was down to a

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1/ Ibid.

2/ United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 1991", New York, 1991

3/ Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, "Education for the Filipino", Manila, 1977

mere 10%. By 1990, the education budget share went up to 20.2%.[1/] This is, despite valiant efforts to sustain the Constitutional mandate for priority status of education, in the national budget.

High Technology is the New Resource of the 1990s

Given the fact that hi-tech is the crucial resource for development, it is important to ask, what options are open to the Philippines?

The earlier option of continuing the status quo will not do, particularly in view of the resource limitations, and the continuously expanding needs of the sector. I propose, instead, a strategy that goes beyond economic resources and human skills, and rests on mobilizing and optimizing a new resource for the 1990s: namely that of high-technology. Indeed, hi-tech, to paraphrase a more popular expression, is an instrument of tremendous power, fueled by the mammoth information industry. So far it has served only the industrialized countries. But hi-tech for poor countries is the new strategy I propose - an idea perhaps that may contradict with our normal perception of development. For the routine attitude is that poor people are poor and therefore do not deserve modern communications, but should rather do with cheap, basic, and elementary facilities. Well, I vehemently object to this kind of thinking. For with hi-tech, it is now possible to bring all the news of the world, all the entertainment of the world, the powers of the computer onto the very doors of the poorest through the wonder of electrical power, the radio, television, and satellite communications. Hi-tech is the sustaining fuel of the industrialized countries. It is important to realize that the nature of modern technology is such that it can be made available to the poorest families of the Third World.

Introducing New Education Strategy

At this point, one may ask: for what purpose are we to apply educational innovations and hi-tech? My reply would be: to strengthen the just, sound and productive Filipino society. Such a society, like any growing society, is inevitably built on three pillars:

1. Upon healthy citizens, who make a healthy nation, and is the first requirement for a sustained development.

2. Upon educated and trained persons who may acquire the right attitudes, work values, knowledge, skills, and experience to become self-reliant and productive citizens.

3. Healthy and educated/trained citizens, once equipped with communications skills and communications facilities, can be nurtured into a knowledge-based society where information, know-how, and learning can be an everyday part of life.

Health, education and communications - these elements form the triumvirate foundation of a just, sound and productive society and are basic requirements for a sustainable development.

1/ Arcelo, Adriano, "Financing of Philippine Education", Education Commission, Manila, 1991

Let me elaborate on these.

First in the field of health. Individual health is directly related to productivity. Chronic poverty contributes to the inability of its citizens to be strong and to sustain their bodies against the scarcities of their environment. The long-run productivity of the poor can be increased through improving the delivery system of health care, infant nutrition, and improving environmental conditions. Nutrition and health care are the most urgent programs where additional resources should be directed. Education programs for mothers focussing on nutrition, breastfeeding, and childrearing practices supported by early nutrition can contribute in attaining this objective. In the Philippines, poor students have lower performance in ability tests. This is partly due to conditions related to their nutritional status combined with environmental deprivation.[1/]

Second, reforms in the education sector itself. To my mind, the most significant reform would be the establishment of an alternative system that would support education for all programs, complement, enrich, and supplement the existing formal education system or schooling, in terms of both quality and quantity. The first concern of education should be to service all of the citizenry equally - not exclusively the elite or the middle-class. If the majority of population is rural-based, impoverished, dysfunctional, and is often confronted not only by the pangs of poverty and ignorance but also by natural disasters such as floods, typhoons, droughts and volcanic eruption - how can education be responsive to the greater populace? If education remains aloof of these realities, divorced from the countryside, and inaccessible to the poor, its effectiveness gets curtailed. Certainly, formal schooling in the Philippines has done remarkable achievements in literacy and skills-development. But what about the millions more who are out of the schooling system; the millions more who drop out or fail or discontinue for one reason or another; and the millions more who have graduated or completed their schooling but now have no opportunity to further upgrade themselves? How are they to be serviced?

And as to the third point, i.e. communications, I have to say that conventional methods of imparting instruction are now inadequate. The school is no longer the sole purveyor of knowledge and shaper of social attitudes. Mass media such as radio and television play a crucial role in the dissemination of knowledge. As mentioned above, radio has the advantages of wide reach, low cost and can be used even in areas without electricity. Television can also be an extremely powerful instrument for spreading education. Space technology, with the invention of the direct broadcast satellite (DBS), has made possible the reception of television programs in very remote areas. This has reduced capital costs in Canada, Japan, India, the USSR, and the United States. Many European countries, the USSR, Canada and India all have operational DBS systems. Many other countries have initiated efforts in this direction.[2/]

1/ Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, "Master Plan For Secondary Education", Manila, 1984

2/ Sharma, Motilal, "Educational Broadcasting and Distance Education as a Strategy for Revitalizing Education of the Disadvantaged", Manila, 1990; also ERIC, ED 317 837, Ohio, 1990

Open Learning Systems is the Wave of the Future

To support my earlier proposal to use the strategy of hi-tech for the 1990s, the experience of modern education around the world today prove beyond doubt, the relevance, quality, and cost-effectiveness of educational technology based on mass media in the education and training of people. And the particular form of open learning systems that seems to be most manageable and feasible is distance education. Distance education is "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner." [1/] In practice, distance education usually involves a combination of mass media (such as radio, TV and film) so as to compensate for the limitations of an individual medium and derive the maximum advantages from all the media used. The media used in distance education are generally reinforced through correspondence studies and tutorial/practical sessions.[2/]

The most advanced articulations of distance education are in the form of open universities. Open Universities are already established in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, People's Republic of China, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, whereas the governments of other developing countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal respectively, are actively considering setting up of such institutions. In India, more than 20 per cent of its universities have distance education courses in the arts, sciences and technologies, and a number of Open Universities have been opened. Bangladesh is seriously considering the establishment of an open university to provide opportunities for young Bangladesh who seek entry to university places, of which there are over 100,000 every year who cannot be accommodated. In Maldives, a distance education center is being planned for the teaching of English, for teacher-training, health education, population education, and technical-vocational education. Nepal has formed a task force to consider the establishment of distance education system. In Pakistan, the Allama Iqbal Open University is being strengthened to improve its existing programs. Similarly, the government of Bhutan has initiated plans to expand their current limited distance education programs.[3/]

The open university through distance education could provide a wide variety of courses at levels ranging from literacy programs to higher degrees, and assisting the poor and those residing in far-flung, rural areas to develop functional literacy, livelihood skills, self-reliant enterprises, and information useful to their own personal growth. Open learning system is the means for millions of teachers, new and in-service to upgrade themselves; for government employees to achieve higher educational levels; and for millions of farmers, extension workers and rural families to get up-to-date market information, more employment skills and production know-how. Without detracting from the

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1/ Sharma, Motilal, "Distance Education: Professional Staff Paper", Asian Development Bank, 1985; also ERIC ED 281 508, Ohio, 1985

2/ Ibid.

3/ Sharma, Motilal, "Technologies to Improve In-Class Instruction," World Bank Seminar, Washington, D.C., 1988; also ERIC, Ohio, 1988

achievements and usefulness of the schooling system, the overriding concern is how to promote self-reliance as a strategy for education, thus liberating the learner to achieve the ultimate goal of education for all (which I doubt could be achieved without full use of communication technologies) especially with self-learning capabilities, as learners will become their own best teachers and will not be dependent upon the provision of a school and a teacher to acquired knowledge. All these characteristics and functional advantages of distance education have to be harnessed for the education of the masses, and to achieve the goals in the shortest possible time, with distance education strategy's proven efficiency and effectiveness. Ignorance is the singular great enemy; and liberation of the learner is the ultimate mission.

Quality: An Important Factor in Distance Education

The common fallacy that quality may suffer in distance education has little basis in fact. As it were, it is formal schooling that suffers from lack of quality. Although the majority of the poor have access to elementary education, the educational system in the Philippines is regressive at all levels. At the elementary level, this regression stems from the variance in quality - poorer students receive lower quality services. At the secondary level, there is not only inequality within public schools, but there is also lack of access to quality private education system. At the tertiary level, the regression becomes more acute where subsidies are larger and go mostly to students from higher income families.

A powerful justification is that distance education can avail of the most talented teachers, experts, and resource persons throughout the Philippines. They can be recruited from the universities, colleges, research institutes, training centers, mass media organizations, and from private business, government agencies, and international institutions. There is no limit to the talent that can be tapped by distance education through the use of radio and television and audio-visual cassettes, motion pictures, film slides, print modules, etc. Multi-media strategies allow the delivery of the best lecturers and experts of Manila - and from around the world - to the most remote areas in the Philippines.

Flexibility Is Strength of Distance Education

Distance education allows for the proper design and approach to modes of delivery of educational services, and to expand nonformal education methods particularly open learning systems. It allows for wider choices of curricula and programs, responsive and sensitive as it were to market forces. It also allows for parental and community involvement in various facets of education in communities - whether in promoting the cause of employment, of teacher-recruitment and monitoring, or of helping in the financing and construction of classrooms and school buildings. Because of its functional utility and room for creative approach, distance education also encourages decentralized activities in the definition of goals, in making curricula, and in the delivery of services. This is made more real by the fact that the country's geographic terrain, environmental situation, local cultural milieu, and the diverse aspirations of local communities.

Enrichment of, and Complementarity with Formal Schooling

Distance education, with its wide array of training materials and modes of delivery, including mass media, does not seek to replace, or dissolve, or transplant formal schooling. It should not do that. What it should do is to enrich the quality, to supplement the outputs and results, and complement the delivery of educational services to the most remote families and students throughout the 7,000 islands of this archipelago. It can provide effective support service to the classroom teacher and help convert libraries into learning resource centers becoming a more attractive place for promoting learning. The teacher can be fully armed with portable 3-dimensional media, and a wide array of training tools and aids, so that he can teach anywhere in the country - and carry the best talents from the important centers of the world to all citizens of the nation.

But let us examine the more pragmatic issues of feasibility, viability, and sustainability of distance education in the Philippines now.

Questions of Feasibility

The feasibility for distance education in the Philippines can be firmly established on the basis of certain assumptions.

First is the issue of available resources. There are two operative options here. One is to optimize whatever resources are available today for the advancement of distance education. It is quite clear that these are not to be limited to the universities, colleges, or schools themselves. It is hi-tech that will be the most powerful resource of the future. In other sectors such as in broadcast media, print and publications media, postal services, computer facilities, satellite communications, and softwares and training aids for teaching and learning materials in the country.

Next is the question of skilled manpower. Are there experts, teachers, specialists, craftsmen, administrators, and practitioners in distance education of sufficient number, and adequate education/training, to create, produce, manage, and deliver programs to the widest possible markets throughout the Philippines? I think there is a core group of qualified practitioners today - whose numbers can be quickly expanded with proper training by experts in the Philippines and from various countries.

Then there is the question of technology. What model should be used? The sophisticated, high-technology model of the British Open University, or the Japanese University-on-the-Air or the middle ground models of Allama Iqbal University of Pakistan, the Indira Gandhi Open University of India or Sokkethai Thannarat Open University of Thailand? Perhaps a proper mix of the best available models can serve - supplemented by indigenous approaches so strong in the Philippines.

Questions of Viability

The issue of viability is easier to cope with.

First and foremost is the question of clientele or markets. It is so apparent that a vast market exists in the Philippines for distance education. Provision of basic education for all is an important area to which distance eduction can make significant contribution through training of teachers and production of quality instructional materials. In addition, there are thousands of extension workers, nurses and doctors, para-medics, teachers, mailmen, local government officials, and the over 1.3 million government employees. All of these people need constant training and retraining - at home, or their place of work, or in the fields. Distance education and mass media, especially radio, are the best delivery systems for their purposes. To this we must add the thousands of Filipino workers abroad - who can undergo retraining and reorientation once every 2 years on a regular basis through distance education.

Next is the fact that English is pervasive throughout the country. Distance education can therefore tap the world's best available teaching materials - on cassette tapes, on posters, books, manuals, film slides, etc. With proper adaptations, all these English materials can be translated to meet Philippine requirements.

Another factor for viability is the competence, experience, and commercial competitiveness of the private sector, which owns and manages most of the mass media institutions in the Philippines. They can provide the competitive technology, efficient management, and resourceful financing to assist in the viability of distance education.

Questions of Sustainability

This is an important issue.

After training, the question often asked is: so what happens next? Are there jobs available? Are there opportunities for the trained person? Are we going to create a supply of educated unemployed?

I envision distance education not as a replacement or alternative or substitute for formal education. It cannot be so. Rather, it is intended to enrich the quality, supplement the outputs, and complement the delivery system of formal education or schooling. It can be utilized by universities and schools, training institutes, government agencies, employment firms, private companies and multinational corporations as an add-on, an addition to formal education and training programs. Programs in distance education in South Korea, Pakistan, Thailand, and U.K. have proven the cost-effectiveness of distance education compared to the formal schooling system. It will not encroach or eat into the market of formal schooling since its own clientele are so vast in number and variety of needs. The rapid changes in the environment, in technology, especially in hardware and software, encourage the spread of distance education. I recall that when America launched their satellite in space many years ago, their computers had powers of only 52 KB. Today, in my home, I - like many of you - use personal computers of many times more memory. And what is more, the costs of hard work is becoming cheaper every year.

And so I make my case.

Case for National Open University

There are many factors that favor distance education in the Philippines. And at this point, allow me the freedom of calling the proposed institution as the "National Open University" for spelling out this role.[1/]

There is a relatively high literacy rate, compared to other countries in Asia. English as a spoken and communications language is most pervasive. Mass media - particularly radio and TV - are very extensive, propelled by private enterprise and the government media network. There is electricity in more than 80 per cent of the country. There is an extensive market of battery-operated radio sets, especially in the rural areas. As a cultural habit, Filipinos seek education as a status symbol and a social ladder-step. The female population particularly rank high in participation rates, low in dropouts, and high in completion and graduation accomplishments. There is availability of qualified faculty, available resources and facilities, and expertise both in the Philippines and elsewhere to put up such a system. It is my considered judgment that such an institution is feasible. Basic infrastructure for such an institution which could be upgraded through establishment of core facilities and provision of trained manpower.

Implement What Is There

I do not make a far-fetched claim or dream.

There are several reasons for the increasing use of mass media in education. First, the educational systems in several Asian and Pacific countries are not suitable for meeting the challenge of economic growth which is primarily based on agricultural and rural development. Patterned each on the basis of its individual culture the educational systems in many of these countries are now undergoing a change with emphasis on the provision of practical knowledge to farmers and rural youth for the development of appropriate skills. In several countries, the technological expertise needed for rural transformation has not yet reached the rural people and in many cases extension workers lack training and skills of teaching adults. This situation warrants incorporating the advances of communications technology into new techniques of teaching. Second, the human and financial resources available for education are limited in many countries. Traditional and institutional methods have proved inadequate to fulfill the growing needs of formal as well as non-formal education and now, for the first time, mass media can provide the means to offer quality education in selected fields to large number of people without incurring huge expenditures on overheads and infrastructure. Third, there is a growing awareness on the part of educationists and policy planners, of the decline in the quality of education, despite quantitative gains. Mass media can enlarge access to the best available teaching talent and benefit a large number of people.

1/ Sharma, Motilal, "Educational Broadcasting and Distance Education as a Strategy for Revitalizing Education of the Disadvantaged", 1990; also ERIC, Ohio, 1990

Educating Women Through Distance Education

Distance education is an approach which is "gender-sensitive". It can shape and mould curricula, teaching methods, and learning environment in ways which allow convenience, ease of learning, and enthusiasm for studying on the part of women and girls - whether they are working at home, attending to children, or in the fields or factories. It allows women adequate access to the knowledge, skills, and values vital to their responsibilities and expand opportunities for personal growth and awareness of community and national affairs. For example, distance education can reach hundreds of thousands of housewives, para-medics, faith healers, village elders, and abandoned girls, orphans, the physically handicapped women and girls, who otherwise would be left entirely on their own.[1/]

Distance Education for Poverty Alleviation

Distance education shatters the myth that the poor must first be literate before they can be educated. For it can reach the hovels of the poor, at their very door steps and huts, through radio, and inform him in a thousand ways. And he need not know how to read or write. He can learn listening to radio especially if programs are produced with creativity, sensitivity, and with skill. Television will even serve better. TV sets can be located in community centers. Through sound and visuals, people can learn, be informed, be entertained, inter-act and make more informed decisions. Skills for livelihood, for functions like marketing, production, and information on credit and trade, and access to raw materials and buyers, can all be provided via radio and TV. What poor people need is more information and skills - and distance education can provide this effectively and conveniently. For example, Smokey Mountain in Tondo could be a pilot project for distance education in such areas as health and sanitation, community organization and management, livelihood skills and enterprise development, youth leadership, home budgeting and management, etc.[2/]

Environmental Education Through Distance Education

Sustainable development of scarce and dwindling natural resources call for peoples' awareness of the environmental problems involved. Only through massive information, more knowledge, and training, can rural communities themselves actively participate in environmental protection, conservation, and development. Radio may be the only means to reach thousands of communities in inaccessible geographic regions. The battery allows government and environmentalists to provide remote villages with radio sets and therefore reach out to them in ways that are culturally acceptable, socially desirable, and technically feasible. For example, distance education can supplement formal training programs usually launched by government agencies and international development institutions for people-empowered reforestation programs. After the experts leave a community, radio-delivered lessons plus scheduled tutorials and mobile education vans can then take over and continuously provide information, guidelines, support, and feedback to such communities in ways that

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1/ Sharma, Motilal, "Technology in Distance Education: Future and Issues", New Delhi, 1990

2/ Ibid.

are convenient and socially acceptable. For example, take the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Hundreds of families have been affected. Distance education is the best means to help these people in awareness-building, and skills-training for new and modified forms of livelihood and farming. Radio and TV, which is available in the locale, can be maximized through distance education. Lessons can be taught and delivered even in existing schools - better still, at the very heart of the evacuation centers. We can film the best experts on survival, on pertinent livelihoods, on community mobilization - and then replay them to the refugees in the evacuation centers. That is a matter really of disaster preparedness training and education - which can be brought about by distance education. All of this is feasible.[1]

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that I used to think, when I was teaching in the rural villages of India, that nothing happens to education unless it first happens in the classroom. I still think that philosophy prevails today in the formal education system.

But in the light of extensive mass media and the existence of open learning systems throughout the world today, I must conclude with this thought: nothing happens to society unless it first happens in the home. To my mind, the power and potential of distance education allows this development.

And its feasibility.

Thank you.

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1/ Ibid.